

The Amulet of Aghdhul, Chapters 1 4

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Summary: An evil emperor will stop at nothing to regain the prized possession of his ancestors: The Amulet of Aghdhul.

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> <meta name="Generator"> I finally finished touching up the 4th installment to the ongoing 'Amulet of Aghdhul'

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### Prologue

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The rain was now falling remorselessly, pelting the Mossflower forest with rainwater, dripping off branches, trickling down trunks and onto woodland path. All creatures cursed to suffer the wrath of this disaster took refuge wherever it could be found. A badger father and mother splashed through a creek, hurriedly trying to usher their young into the safety of their burrow. Quail herded their chicks tactfully to safety. All of the ferretbabes followed their mother to the den in the side of a rotting ash.

All, that is save one. Gouge Eye, a mercenary ferret, had four daughters and two sons. All he could meander from the head count in his den was five helpless babes. That meant his youngest son was nowhere to be found. Yet, there was nothing Gouge Eye could do for his babe whilst this terrible monsoon continued its reign.

The wind was beginning to howl like a wounded animal, and rain pounded down hard. Branches of mighty oaks began to crack and sway under pressure, and creeks and rivers flooded over.

In the worst part of the forest that a beast could possibly wish to be during a storm such as this, a young ferretbabe was marooned, hopelessly lost from all. He had become separated from his fleeing

family when a flash of lightning struck suddenly, very close by. The young one, never having left the den, was distraught by this awful sight. He stood in a terrified daze until a deer whizzed by, sending him reeling backwards off the hilltop. The soaking ferretbabe landed with a wet splat! He was now filthy, covered in muck like an unruly young Dibbun who had refused to bathe, lest he melt.

The ferret was out cold for a moment, but awoke to find himself in a soggy marsh, mud bubbling from the fresh falling rainwater. He brought himself up on his paws, then proceeded to scale the slippery cliff and regroup with his family. It was a horrible task, slip sliding and falling down were common acts as the babe continued on, setting his sights to the top of the muddy hill.

When he finally reached the path again, he began whimpering in joy, expecting to see his father's loving face, for his mother to take him in her paws to the safety of home. But nobeast was there. Why was that so? He had never been alone, and did not understand. The young one began to panic, knowing something was aghast. Seeking his family, he searched about wildly, throwing wet leaves hither and thither, scrambling through brush and around trees. He sat, exhausted, and took in his surroundings. There were other lost young ones, mainly quail and badgers, but he was far too unassertive to speak with them. He decided he would think of some reason as to why his family disappeared. The small creature had to keep himself occupied somehow, lest he fall asleep from weariness.

Finally, it struck him, after much pondering, as lightning to a huge oak not too far from his position. An icy claw of sheer terror gripped his heart, like none he had ever experienced. He was lost, never to see his family again. No warm fire in the safety of home, with bright flames licking up in the fireplace. No longer could he hear his mother's voice, singing his nightly lull-a-bye with her sweet voice. There would be no more cozy afternoons of romping and wrestling with his brother.

In an act of despair, he threw his head high and let loose his frustration in a long, painful cry. The piercing howl carried not far through the sopping woodland. Lit birds flapped their startled wings as the mournful sound was forever lost in the whirling, screeching winds.

Chapter One

At Redwall Abbey, all was right, nought but the rain outside was askew. Abbess Byrny, a now middle-aged mouse of considerable roots, stared out the giant, stained glass window in Great Hall. Never in her whole life had she ever seen this much rain! The rain was badly needed, and would be cause for much thankful feasting. Her mind began wandering over various subjects. Friar Bunfold, her long time friend, had been gone for nearly a whole season. Bunfold had gone to the great mountain, Salamandastron, to assist the great Badger Lord, Myrial's other cooks prepare for the feasting season. He should have returned by now, she thought. She decided it was time to go to bed, the rain's rhythmic beat was causing her to doze.

Upon seeing their leader rise from her perch of nearly two hours, about a dozen assistants flooded the Abbess ready to cater to her every need. "Milady, is there anything we can get you? Tea? An escort to your room?" "Abbess Byrony, begging your pardon I'm sure, but can you possibly.." "Abbess!" "Erm, Byrony.." The Abbess could take no more. Her temper snapped, which was extremely uncommon. "A thousand mice cannot be heard at once, and I am too tired to speak with anyone. Mayhap I will speak to some if I can only get some order in here!" She said simply.

A hush quickly fell, the crowd understanding her cross mood: she longed for Bunfold's return. Everybeast present knew that the Abbess harbored deep feelings for the chubby mouse chef. Byrony, pleased with the silence, turned towards the mice and spoke again." Now, that's better. Those of you with jobs, go attend them. No since standing around here trying to look busy. You know the saying, 'Busy paws are far more useful than busy ears.' Whomever needs to speak with me, if it is extremely urgent, then you can meet me outside my room. Goodnight." The Abbess' irritation was obvious in her tone. She regained her composure in a hurry as she seemingly hovered out of the room.

[illegible]

Not far from the Abbey, something rustled in the underbrush. Once, twice, thrice it rattled and shook, sending leaves whipping every-which way.

Suddenly, a grotesque form, covered in wet rags, shot forth from the bushes, muddy rainwater splashing as it bounded for cover.

The first thing it saw in its obscured vision was a great, reddish-pink wall of stout sandstone. Yes, this had to be the place. The dark figure halted, and drawing its hood back, it now revealed itself to be a young, beautiful vixen. Oblivious to the rain splashing on her face, she looked the building over.

She was sleek, cunning, no doubt a sly one, judging by the gleam in her eye.

The vixen spoke like a whisper of wet silk across a slate. "Ah, yes. Morfa was correct. This place is huge. My master never lies." The creature shifted its hood to reveal a pendant on its forehead. It glimmered and sparkled as the vixen continued. "Ah, the pendant glows furiously, I feel it. That means I am close! Father is here. I can feel him, too." She cast off the tattered rags and strode confidently up to the gate of Redwall Abbey.

[illegible]

"Abb's Brinee! Abb's Brinee! Comm quick!" A young otter named Peajoe waddled up behind the great draped form and tugged urgently at the drooping sleeve.

"Yes, my little leeksprout, what is it?" Though Byrony was in no mood to deal with whatever was wrong at the moment, she had a soft spot for Dibbuns.

"Sentry spotted a foxwolfy, a foxwolfy commin' to tha Abb'y!" Just after he finished his barely understandable sentence, three loud, wet knocks thudded on the main door and echoed through Great Hall.

Thud! Knock! Thud!

Peajoe sprang up with a surprised squeak, and the Abbess scooped him up in her paws.

[illegible]

The vixen with the pendant rapped on the door three times, hoping to get an answer. "Please, let a vixen in out of the rain! I won't bring no harm to ye! I swear on my oath as a fox! Hurry! It's freezing out here!" The mysterious figure was now bare to the fur, nothing to shield herself from the rain. Her fur was damp with the splattering rainwater as she continued banging on the door.

Gatekeeper Murdoch Mouse planted his unwavering stare on the strange visitor. Peering down from the ramparts, he could make out the shape of a fox with his keen vision, even through all the rain and weather. The ramparts were shielded from the rain by huge trees, hence the presence of sentries during such terrible weather.

"State your name, fox, and why we should let vermin such as yourself enter our peaceful abbey." He called out, clear enough to hear through the howling winds.

Her answer was barely audible, but Murdoch's adept ears worked like twin radars to pick up the reply.

"M'name's Aralia, daughter of Foxblood, the warrior. I don't mean harm to any creature. Please, I beg ye, let me in!"

She was beginning to stammer and sob, but not truthfully. She had ways of getting things done, and she needed to get in, no matter what the cost.

The young gatekeeper was no fool, but could see no harm in letting this sobbing creature in to rest. "Well, all right, but we'll have to search you first, for weapons, you know. Two sentries will be sent down to assist you. But make no mistake, if harm comes to a whisker on their face, you'll regret it, believe you me, vixen."

After he finished his sentence, Murdoch Mouse looked to Togget, the Foremole of the Abbey, and whispered, "Right. You know what to do." Togget's mole dialect was a chore to understand, but Murdoch was used to it. "Aye, 'tis time me wurriers!" He beckoned to a group of fierce-looking mole warriors, who were strictly for safety precautions. "Follow oi down sturers, an' be quioet about et!" There was a murmur of affirmation, then, in single file, the warriors followed two sentries, Leopold and Turpig, both formidable mouse warriors, themselves, down the stairs to meet with Abbess Byrony.

Within seconds, Leopold, Turpig and the Foremole's band were

conversing with Abbess Byrony. She spoke first. "I know of the vixen outside. Daughter of Foxblood, that old fox that lives in the wine cellars. Make sure she knows about that, too." This was said confidentially to the sentries and moles. She then spoke loud enough for the crowds of mice, otters, shrews, and other residents of the Abbey to hear. "Well, she's tired and hasn't another place to lodge, so let her in!" Hearty cheers and applause arose for the Abbess' prompt decision, for Redwallers were always glad to have more enter the Abbey. Byrony added in a whisper, "Foremole, you and your band check her over. See that she doesn't look intimidating enough to scare the little ones will you?" She said, gesturing to the shaking form of Peajoe clinging to her leg. Togget's face crinkled into a smile as he turned, and tugged his snout respectfully. He then, between chortles, followed the procession to welcome the newcomer to Redwall Abbey.

Aralia clasped the pendant to her head and smiled. Getting in was even easier than she thought it would be. Leaning close against the wall to try to get out of the rain, she ran her Master Morfa's instructions over in her head again and again. Her master's plan to avenge his grand sire's death. Get in the Abbey, first, he had told her. Start a mutiny; next, something to turn the Redwallers against themselves, where they would do her work for her. Anger, distrust, all could cause peaceful creatures to turn on one another. She had not the power to kill the Redwall creatures, but this scheme would do the job even better. Now all she had to do was come up with a way to enact those evil deeds.

Not long after that, the sentries had done a weapon check and found nothing dangerous on their visitor. But the shining pendant, its eerie blue-green glow emanating from the vixen's forehead was immediately noticed. Aralia explained that it once belonged to the magic sparrowhawk, Aghdhul, and that she could not tell them who she gained it from. The moles snickered at this remark, but the mice recognized the name.

They recognized it well from faerie tales as the great sorcerer and once leader of Mossflower Woods, who caused famine and destruction to all who opposed him. One insolent mole found this to be absolutely hilarious. He began making wise cracks to others around him. "Ogdool moi snout! Heh, shei prolly stollid et from some pore cretter she kelled afore commin' ere to both'r us hurr aye!" Leopold gave him a stern glare and turned to Aralia. "Well, the rain's letting up, but we still should go in to discuss this in private. I'm sure Abbess Byrony would be thrilled to know that the Amulet of Aghdhul is right here in Redwall!" Aralia looked knowingly at the mouse and agreed, "Yes, I suppose so. Well, come along then." Turpig led the group back inside to Main Hall, and Gatekeeper Murdoch closed the gate behind them as they entered.

Chapter Two

The lost ferret was extremely resourceful at such a young age. He had found some bugs to eat, and sucked a flat, dew-covered stone to control his thirst. Long since recovered from the initial shock of abandonment, he had followed a trodden deer path to a nice, full

thicket. He pawed at the moist, leaf covered ground. Then, curling up into a wretched wet ball, he attempted to fall asleep.

The chirruping of the grasshoppers after the rain was enormous. The sounds echoed through the damp forestland and gave the area an aura, like a sacred jungle, never before touched by anybeast, other than the insects.

The fresh day came after a long, moonless night. Enveloping the land with vigor for a new day, the bright sun sent golden shafts of light streaming down through the forest canopy and on to the sleeping form of a now dry ferretbabe.

He wriggled and shifted in sleep, unaware that a plump old harewife was in his company.

The hare watched as the young one slept. After a while, he finally awoke with a yawn and stretch. "Wakey, wakey, young' un! Twill do ye no good to sleep your life away, now will it? Where are your parents, anyway?" The ferret was totally shocked, upon noticing he was being watched, but did not show it. He took a fighting stance as the hairs raised on the back of his neck and a growl rumbled deep in his throat. "Grr, What are ya doin' spyin on me? Leave me 'lone!"

The hare was totally flattered to see it up and about on all four paws. "Well, young sir, beggin' your pardon, but it looks t'me like you need some help!" The ferret continued to growl and took cautious steps backwards as the hare's huge ears flopped forward. He continued doing so until he ran out of room and backed into a giant tree stump. Bump! He sprang in the air, shocked. Upon landing, he began rubbing his hind end thoughtfully, and wincing, barked back, "C'n take care of meself!" The hare was not chastened, she obviously did not give up easily.

She responded in a cheery tone, "Ah, the independent type. Well, I know you need my help so I'll help you anyway. Do you have a reason for being out here all alone? I'll be more than happy to listen."

The ferretbabe calmed down somewhat, and began to see that the hare meant good. He lay on the damp ground next to the rabbit.

Between snuffles, he told his story. "And that's how I got separated from me fam'ly las' night." He buried his face in his paws and wept. "There, there, little one. It'll be all right. Ol' Agnes will take care of you. There, there." He lifted his head, and the hare wiped his eyes. Agnes had to scold herself; she almost started laughing, for she didn't know whether he was crying from losing his family or from hurting his bum!

The ferret then spoke in a quavering voice. "Oh, an' m'name's Mythryll." He turned and looked out into the forest.

"Wow, sure did get quiet."

Agnes got up on two hindpaws and spoke to the babe. "C'mon, I'll take you back to my burrow an' get ye all tidied up. Then I'll get ye some proper vittles. How'd ye like that, eh, wot?" Mythryll smiled through his tears and nodded. "Hey, Agnes, can ye teach me t' walk on to paws like that?"

The kindly old harewife put a comforting paw on each of the young ferret's shoulders and glowered, "Ah, of course I can, ya little ruffian! " laughing, she added, "By the fur on my face I can! See, young 'un, just steady y'self on this here oak, now up, up on y' feet. There, now take a step. Good! Now keep going, ah, y' doing good!" Mythryll was grinning from ear to ear as Agnes attempted to teach him to walk on two hindpaws.

He was thoroughly enjoying her company. The once abandoned ferret just knew that if he couldn't be with his family, then he would be in good paws with Agnes.

The two strolled through the glowing morning forest towards the old hare's home, Mythryll supporting his unsteady, now two-footpawed body on Agnes' steady one. As they walked, the ferret and hare continued to carry on bits of conversation, friend to friend.

[illegible]

All Redwall was in the Great Dining Hall as a surprise feast was thrown. It was not as fancy and elaborate as Redwall feasts are known for, but quite splendid for such a short notice party. There were steaming pasties, fruit turnovers (which were huge hits among the Dibbuns) warm, flaky pies, aromatic leeksprout stews, scrumptious hotroot soups, and, of course, deeper 'n' ever pie dishes. The smells of the delicious foods mingled and rose to the rafters, along with the murmurs of conversation.

At the Abbess' table, all of her private attendants, Leopold, Turpig, Togget, Gatekeeper Murdoch, the Abbey Recorder Mr. Mehndhul, the wise old owl Stonebeak, and various other Abbey elites listened, spellbound, to Aralia the Vixen's tale.

Aralia was now clothed in a pearl-colored silken gossamer, cloth only given to very special guests. She sat sipping mint tea whilst she satisfied her audience's thirst for knowledge of her amulet and it's owner.

The owl, Stonebeak, already knowing quite a bit about Aghdhul, seized the amulet from its resting place on the table. Holding it in his left talon and inspecting it incredulously, he spoke in his peculiar whistling voice. "Well, never in all my born daysh have I witnesshed a shight shuch as thish! The Amulet of Shorcherer Aghdhul! Yesh, musht contain enough magic to curl the feathersh of a gaggle of geesh!" Aralia laughed dryly. This was going to be a long night.

"Yesh, I mean, yes, I suppose so." Abbess Byrony cut in. "Aralia, it's obvious that you have friends among some magical creatures, to be able to lay your paws on a relic such as this. If you don't mind me asking, who, or whom did you acquire this amulet from?"

Aralia looked around uncomfortably. The Abbess had caught her totally off guard. "Well, I, .." She cut herself off by coughing a few nervous coughs. Abbess Byrony looked at the stammering vixen strangely. "You have nothing to be afraid of, child. If you are uncomfortable telling us this, then perhaps we need not know." Aralia smirked childishly towards the Abbess, who either didn't notice, or

didn't care.

The vixen then snatched the amulet away from the owl, he was beginning to scratch its shiny surface with his sharp beak.

Avoiding eye contact with any of the creatures who sat at her table, Aralia gazed into the amulet and spoke once more, but in a whisper, a shaky, scared voice.

She sounded terrified, scared out of her wits. "I, I shouldn't tell you this, but I will. I got this amulet from my Master, Morfa Fleetwind. He attained it from a source I do not know. I can tell you no more." This being said, she cast a wary glance over each shoulder.

Abbess Byrony appeared nonplussed. "Why so uneasy, vixen? Your master will not know what you have told us. He will bring no harm to you for any reason, as long as you remain here, that is."

The mouse looked around for support. "Isn't that right Leopold? Turpig? Mehndhul, you too." The aforementioned mice nodded in eager agreement.

Mehndhul the Recorder spoke surely to the quivering Aralia. "Listen to the good Abbess, vixen. She speaks the truth. You can rest easy knowing that the creatures of this abbey will take care of you, readily."

Stonebeak whistled his two cents. "That ish true, Mehndhul, but enough of thish unhappy talk. Let'sh hear more of thish Aghdhul. Yesh?"

Leopold nodded vigorously. "Yes, please. I would dearly love to hear more about him. Not much is known of the Great Sorcerer Aghdhul. P'rap's you know something, Aralia?"

Aralia had lost interest in their conversation, she had been staring at an unknown point of interest apparently on the east wall of the Great Hall. She looked as if she was in some sort of daze. Lifting a limp paw, she pointed at the wall.

"Whâ€|what is â€|thâ€|that?" Everybeast at the table followed her gaze to the wall. She appeared to be pointing at the tapestry of Redwall.

It was an old relic of the place, a timeless heirloom passed down from generation to generation. Specifically, she looked as if she was pointing to the piece of Martin the Warrior.

Togget piped up first. "Hurr, that'n be Marthen 'ee Wurrier! He'm be a gurt legend 'roun' ere, hurr aye. Why you'm apurred ascarred of 'em? He'm wurra gudd beast, no resson t' be scurred of 'em, burr no."

Aralia still stared in disbelief. "I..It's just that.. Iâ€|Iâ€|The castleâ€|.what is thatâ€|.castle..?" Thry all looked over the tapestry and spotted, woven into the cloth, a castle situated on a high, craggy ledge with ocean waves wisping about it.

Stonebeak, being the wisest present, spoke to Aralia. "That ish the cashul of Creggul. Emperor Dashmush rulesh theat curshed place. Why sho interested in it, vikshen?" Aralia did not answer. The amulet in her paw glowed furiously, and a bright green-blue light enveloped her body. All the creatures at the table stood and took wary steps back.

Byrony looked unbelieving at the glowing fox. "A-Are you alright, Aralia?" The fox made a groaning noise as she swayed groggily from side to side. Aralia muttered an incoherent string of names and places: "Dâ€|aaasmussâ€|unhh â€|.Das..mus...." Nearly choking, and sputtering for breath, the vixen made her way through the awed masses.

The Dining Hall was a scene of chaos, animals running everywhere, not sure to whether to laugh or scream. Nobeast knew what was going on. The seemingly sleepwalking vixen stumbled towards the tapestry. Aralia stopped before it and pointed at a castle woven into the cloth. The structure was surrounded by water, quite dreary looking, with bats swooping about it. As she pointed, the glowing amulet slid out of her paw and clattered onto the floor.

When it hit, the light promptly discontinued its shining, like a candle being snuffed out. She spoke again, keeping her eyes trained on the object of interest, the likeness of the castle of Creggul.

This time, her voice was just above a whisper: "Creggul. My place of destiny. Morfa may not have his revenge, but..." Her breathing became troubled as she finished. "But...I.. must... have mine..."

Aralia promptly fainted.

~~~~~ Chapter 3 ~~~~~ Far off in a series of craggy stone mountains, uncharted territory to ordinary beasts, a place unimaginable to most creatures, a castle sat situated on the highest peak. It was quite an intimidating site, with white capped waves swishing and washing below its tide line. The stretch from the castle to the ocean below was a sickening drop. Three Salamandastron Mountains sat upright and atop each other could not span the immeasurable distance. Yet, somehow, creatures managed to survive there. Birds; outcasts of their species: Savage sparrows, keen-visioned hawks, violent ravens and crows, even some owls and sparrowhawks, all falling under the tyrannical rule of High Emperor Dasmus. Dasmus was the great grandson of Sorcerer Aghdhul the Evil One, and ruler of the cavernous gloom that was Creggul Castle. The Sorcerer title became extinct after Aghdhul's mysterious disappearance; no one believed in sorcery like they had used to, so magic had just about vanished. This scum-laden fortress was previously owned by a peaceful bunch of mice; They has called it Windsong Castle, and it was ruled by a fat old mouse named Gabriel. It had been so very different then. Now it was the home to the very embodiment of evil. Somewhere in the sullen winding tunnels and dusty chambers that had been scratched long ago by paw and shovel, the throne room of the High Emperor sat almost empty. Almost. "Deathbeak! Wormclaw! Report to my chamber immediately!" A malicious, thundering voice echoed through all of the west side of the castle-fortress. A gigantic sparrowhawk rose from its rat-and-ferret-skull-adorned-throne. Cloaked in a pitch-black habit, Dasmus fit perfectly as the leader of the tenebrous place. Studying

the enormous talons on his right claw, he made a mental note to have the tardy officers executed. Thus was the wrath of the sparrowhawk. Finally, a raven and a sparrow came flustering in, feathers flying as they pecked and clawed furiously, quarreling over who would report the news. Dasmus refused to believe that these were some of his top-ranking officers. "Enough with the naivete, you wormbrained fools! Now show me some order before I slay you right here with my own claws!" This immediately put the captains in their place. Throwing an elaborate salute, the sparrow, Wormclaw, reported the news with great efficiency. "DasmusCheif! Wormclaw speak with GougeEyes. Say he willdo wormjob, but ferret want your help fordo spying for you, DasmusChief." Emperor Dasmus rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a black and brown flecked wing, ruminating the offer over in his cunning mind. "And this ferret, Gauge Eye.." Deathbeak rudely interrupted him: "Gouge Eye." A fatal mistake. Emperor Dasmus roared in anger. He swung a mighty wing at Deathbeak. It connected with its target, sending the unlucky raven flailing backwards. Deathbeak's skull smashed against the cold stone wall with a sickening crunch. The raven's lifeless form slumped stiffly to the ground. The pitiless sparrowhawk continued as though nothing had happened. "I don't give a badger's hide what his name is!" He bellowed to the still form of Deathbeak. "Now, Wormclaw, what sort of terms did he propose in reimbursement for his help?" Wormclaw tried to suppress his fear of the intimidating sparrowhawk, and swallowed nervously as he replied. "MightyCheif, GougeEyes say himwant wormhelp finding lost ferret. Say himwant ten, twenty hawkworm to search bigforest, find ferretpup. Not say anymore, DasmusCheif." The Emperor of Creggul returned to his throne and sat considering the offer. He didn't think it over for long. He threw his giant wings outward, laughing madly. "Ha, of course I'll accept! What's a couple score hawks to a warlord like myself? I trust you will convey this message back to the mercenary, Wormclaw?" The sparrow bobbed his black striped head, saluting with his left wing. "Yes, DasmusCheif. Wormclaw not fail. Give message to ferretworm in Mossingflower forest." Dasmus looked pleased with the sparrow Captain's reply. Maybe Wormclaw was worth keeping after all. He finished off his instructions to the sparrow that didn't know he had just saved his own life. "Good, now go! It is imperative that this is taken care of as quickly as possible, before that badger's hawks arrive. Who knows, they could be spies, listening in for that abbey!" Dasmus had began rambling again, and Wormclaw gave a final salute before setting out through the threshold of the throne room, just as some of the Emperor's assistants had come to dispose of Deathbeak. Swooping through the gloom in the twisting hallways and passages of Creggul Castle, Wormclaw set his mind. Dasmus' family line would not be made a fool again. Especially by anyone associated with 'That Abbey' Chief spoke of. Wormclaw had heard of a massive spat, which occurred long seasons before he was hatched, between an abbey, Redwall, and Creggul, over some woodland creatures that one of Dasmus' predecessors held prisoner. Wormclaw had heard this story many times from the elders of Creggul; especially Vandra the Healer Raven. The spat eventually grew into a war, and the vast horde of Dasmus' grand sire, Aronepeck the Scythe (Who got his name for a long scythe-tipped weapon which he used in combat) was giving a great beating to the untrained defenders of Redwall Abbey. In desperate need of assistance, two errand-mice of the near-defeated abbey set out to the lair of Ajaya Fleetwind, a fearful representation of defiance among mice, being a gigantic wildcat. He was quite a peaceable creature, but in his unstable state, often went into fits of rage when his anger was aroused to the point of it. Upon arrival, the mice were

accepted into the home of Ajaya, and immediately began voicing their pleas of assistance for their home, Redwall Abbey. Ajaya agreed to help them, for he was in an unusually good humor; his mate, Sadira, had just given birth to their first cub, Morfa. The mice returned with scores of reinforcements: Friendly wildcats at that! A great sum of the bird horde of Aronepeck was easily felled, including Aronepeck the Scythe himself; thus Redwall won the war. But the tale does not end at that! Legend has it that the amulet of Aronepeck's father, Sorcerer Aghdhul, accompanied the Scythe upon his death. Aronepeck's corpse was taken to Redwall and incinerated in jubilant celebration, (The thought sickened Wormbeak.) but a mouse seized the shining necklace from the dead warlord. He gave it to a wildcat captain and told the cat to give it to Ajaya as a token of friendship. The Captain obliged, and the amulet was passed down to Ajaya's son, Morfa Fleetwind. This news was gained through intelligence reports from hawks who befriended the wildcats. No one at Creggkul knew what happened to the amulet after that, but word had it that Morfa gave the amulet to a very special vixen he had found stranded as a pup; who he had raised like his own daughter. This story, with a not-so-happy ending for Creggkul, was told only to instill hate for Redwall in the hearts of all Creggkul's inhabitants. Dasmus only allowed it be told over and over so he would be often reminded on what his destiny was: Gain the amulet and destroy the abbey. This ferret mercenary, Gouge Eye, said he had seen a vixen with an amulet enter Redwall Abbey the night of the great flooding. That had been only three days ago. Surely the vixen would not leave so quickly if she was on one of Morfa's evil assignments. This was Wormbeak's new job. High Emperor Dasmus wanted what was rightfully his. If this vixen really did have the amulet, then he wanted it back! The ferret mercenary said he could do the job of spying around the abbey, to see if he could confirm this. Dasmus wanted to attack the abbey, but he would look before he leapt. What a shame it would be for his horde to attack the abbey and the 'amulet' turns out to be just a rumor! Wormbeak zoomed out of the castle's main gate, nodding to the gatekeeper owl. The sparrow was getting lazy. Since he wasn't paying attention, he flew straight into a thermal. Catching a particularly strong gust of freezing wind to the face, Wormbeak was sent flailing helplessly along with the blustering breeze. He lost his bearings and began plummeting downwards, endlessly. He fell like a rock. If not for the thermal's sudden pause, Wormbeak would have crashed into the water and drown. But he didn't. He was lucky, and always had been. After what seemed ages of falling straight down, he regained his bearings and repositioned himself in a low, swooping profile, skimming the water's surface. Flying carelessly along, he thought of what he was doing for his Emperor. Wormbeak was on his way now; performing an act of reestablishing the honor and pride of his master, whom he was faithful to, forever and always. It was his destiny. In a flash of silver, a giant pike suddenly sprang from the murky depths. The fierce fish swished its mighty tail as it flailed above the water. It opened its mouth, full of jagged white teeth, and snapped down. In a whirl of water and feathers, the careless sparrow was gone. Wormbeak's luck had run out.

[illegible]

Burning hot midday sunshine filtered through the canopy of the Mossflower Woods. A slight breeze rustled through the trees, swaying branches back and forth and causing a few dead leaves to cascade to the ground. It was indeed a beautiful day, save for the blistering heat, though a few dark, gray clouds forewarned of the moisture ready to spill from the heavens at any moment. Mythryll sat under an old ash thinking about Agnes. She had been telling him about her husband



astoundingly fast learner. Agnes rushed out of the den holding a steaming plate of scones with fog leaving a wisping trail in her wake. Mythryll followed in hot pursuit, on two footpaws, also. He had just returned from his romp in the woods and was now very hungry. He had attained a hare's appetite; He could down two apple pies and still beg for seconds. Striking a regal pose, Mythryll exclaimed mirthfully: "Well, you old scoundrel! Teasing a body like this!" He lunged for the plate of scones, but Agnes moved them skillfully aside. Mythryll spoke again, this time some of his native ferret speech filtered through his newly gained, dignified hare tongue: "Yer not going anywhere with those scones, if I do say so, madame Agnes!" Agnes set the scones down on the lush green grass: The result of the previous showers. She played along with the name-calling: "Well, you little bloater! Keep your tail on and maybe you'll get fed! Got to let it cool first or it'll burn that bottomless pit of a stomach o' yours, wot!" Mythryll slumped in mock dejection onto the ground. He was hungry, but had never seen Agnes angry, and judging by the tight scowl on her face, did not ever want to see her mad. "I guess I'll just wait, then." Agnes returned to her den, but took a quick glance back to make sure the scones had not been touched. She emerged with a kettle of tea, two cups, and a blanket. Mythryll helped her to spread the blanket on the ground, then reached over to pick up the plate of scones. Agnes swatted his paws away. "No, no, you little villain! You honestly thought I'd fall for that? Take a seat before I change my mind and make you eat the moss growing on that tree o'er yonder!" Mythryll obeyed, folding his paws in a dignified manner. "Okay, missy Agnes! Now may I please have some food?" Agnes glared at Mythryll impassively while setting out cups and pouring tea. She chose to put an end to his whining. "D'you hear of that young'un at the Redwall Abbey o'er yonder? Said he bellowed an' whined so much 'is tongue fell out! Unless y'want the same thing to happen to you, y'best keep quiet!" Mythryll nodded. Agnes handed Mythryll a plate of scones and a cup of tea. He accepted graciously, without saying a word. The pair sat in silence as the nibbled on their evening snack, watching the woodland beauty unfold around them. Fireflies emerged and floated dreamily atop the rolling mist, whilst the sun's last rays crept silently away from the scene. It was truly evening in the Mossflower Woods. The old harewife looked up from her cup, not surprised to see the young ferret already done with his three scones. She handed him the plate with the remaining baked items. A droplet of water splattered on her extended paw. Raindrops began sprinkling on their picnic, a drop landing Mythryll square on the nose. "Ah, no. It's rainin'! Now we're gonna lose the best spots fer watching the sunset!" Mythryll got up and began helping Agnes to pack their utilities away. Rushing into the den just as the rain got harder, the two creatures put the items away, but had no scones to pack up, which was no surprise. The den was warm and homely like, with a fire burning constantly in the hearth, lighting the dim room and chasing the shadows to the far corners of the harewife's home. Many paintings hung on the wall, some of gallant hares, the stuff of legend and faraway lands, full of heroic adventure. Others were of pretty haremaids clutching tiny leverets, some of which were making faces. Mythryll always found these amusing, because in some twisted way, he was now a leveret, since he had no real ferret family anymore. He had begun to forget them, which, surprisingly, didn't upset him that much at all. The paintings always offered him a degree of comfort, reminding him he had someone who did care about him, be they hare or ferret. There was a mapmaking table set in the center of the small cozy room, which belonged to Agnes' husband, Elfred. "Wow, sure is raining a lot for winter time. Don't recall this much rain since at

least eight seasons back, when the old river bottoms flooded." Agnes reminisced. The two were momentarily crestfallen, since they had been looking forward to spending a while outside, watching the sunset, one of their favorite hobbies. Mythryll spoke a bit of information that heartened the pair somewhat. "Hey, Aggie, do you remember those creatures that were taken hostage by some crows out west?" Agnes was seated in a velvety armchair, knitting. She looked up from under her newly adorned spectacles, racking her brain for the names. "Ah, I do. 'Tsa shame, really. A mole, an otter, an' two fellow hares if I recall correctly. One of the hare's names was Callow, a good friend to my nephew. Heard they were taken to some fortress out yonder." Mythryll took a seat next to her, wringing his wet paws. "Well, two hawks from the fire lizard mountain, Salamanda-something-or-other, went to discuss their release. I heard this from some larks out in the woods today. And that's not all." Mythryll gave a momentary pause. He chose to spill the news. "One lark spoke of an 'Ebony Elfred Drake' and a 'Millrose' who were among the prisoners." Agnes stopped dead with her knitting. Looking up slowly, her face betrayed no emotion. Until, a single tear slid down her cheek. A kind of saddened joy swept over Mythryll. He knew she missed Elfred, but realized that it would be painful for her to reunite with a creature who had caused her so much emotional suffering. She stood from the chair and hugged Mythryll without a word. The ferret was happy for her. Agnes realized what this meant; She would have to journey to Redwall Abbey for instructions to Salamandastron, mountain of badgers. This mountain is where the hawks resided, so they obviously knew how to reach the mysterious place of her family's capture.

Mythryll sat at the window gazing out at the rain. Agnes had a pretty good idea as to what he was thinking about. The soft-hearted old harewife wished she could offer the poor beast some condolence, but alas, there was none she could give. Agnes took a seat in an old red armchair, reminiscent of those that badgers lounge in. A cloud of dust rose as she sat. Trying to lighten the ferret's mood, and in key with her new-found happiness from the knowledge of her long-lost family, she tapped him on his shoulder.

Once she had his attention, she began speaking with great mirth, effectively mimicking a mole's curious dialect. Agnes was a master performer. Tugging her nose, she descended from the chair and began swinging her arms in a molish way. "Boo urr, oi'm didden reoilize 'ee ould charrs wurr so dusty. Toime furr a bit 'o earrly spring cleanin' oi s'pose, burr aye."

Mythryll giggled fiendishly, trying to disguise his laughter by clearing his throat. He got up and tapped Agnes on the back in the same way as she had to him.

"Heh heh.. Aggie, you can talk like a mole, now let's see if you can cook like one! I've never tasted Deeper 'n' Ever pie."

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## Chapter 4

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The only source of light in Redwall Abbey's deepest, dankest wine cellars was a crack, no bigger than an apple, in the ceiling of the

dark room. It didn't allow much sunlight in, but at least the creature it held could see their paws in front of their face.

It had been used to hold visitors before, but none housed here for so long as Foxblood, an old, tired fox warrior. Upon losing his family and home during a vermin raid, he sought refuge at Redwall Abbey, where he was taken in to live out the rest of his seasons.

The wrinkled old fox knew she was there.

She just had to be.

How many seasons had it been since he had last seen his daughter? After so long living in this musty wine cellar, he had lost count.

Times long ago, he had once been compared to the great Martin the Warrior, his fearlessness and courage shining brighter than the desert sun.

Foxblood performed daring missions of good will and mercy, uncommon tasks for trained fox warriors to do. He was a more merciful type, his heart having more power over him than his reasoning and brain.

What was he now? A wrinkled old shadow of a has been?

Far from it!

He still had the same eyes, those steely eyes which contained that glint, a fearless glint, warning any foebeast who gave him an awkward glance that it would be their last.

But not this factor alone kept the woodlander's respect for him. He may be grown old, he may have a wrinkled, tawny, faded skin and coat, but he had the power of ten badgers and the energy of twice as many! He now sat alone in this old cellar, passing time by reminiscing on old times, waiting for the day life would throw him a bone.

Just that night, his request was somewhat fulfilled.

Foxblood had heard the cellar keepers discussing a vixen's entrance of the abbey when they had brought him his food for the night. Aralia, his baby girl. She was still alive! The vermin who had kidnapped her must have spared the helpless young fox.

Now she had found her way here, just like the prophecy had foretold seasons ago.

Etched on a stone in the temple of Remei the fox warlord, Foxblood, then a carousing young warrior, had discovered a prophecy he would remember his whole life.

'Coil of snake, wing of drake

None shall stand this maiden's wake

Comrades made, newfound shade

Her master must be disobeyed.'

He didn't quite understand it at first, but that was about to change.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cheater!"

Two sets of feet scrambled up the stairs to the Abbey Infirmary. Two abbey babes were racing to the room where the ill vixen was held.

"Cheater cheater cheater! " Peajoe, the young otter, yelled at the top of his tiny lungs.

"Ahhh! Now you're cheatin' even more!" The otterbabe was obviously upset with his opponent, Ragtob the leveret. He collapsed in a pile of whimpering and strained sobs.

"You've got those big o legs t'use! No! Stop kickin' me! Waaaahh! I'm telling my mum on you Raggety-tob!"

This inspired a laugh from Peajoe's merciless opponent. The young hare was determined to always win, no matter what the contest or what measures he had to go to. Even if it included kicking baby otters in the stomach.

"Hahahah you're okay whiney bag! Stop your blubberin' and get back in the race! Hahahahah!"

Ragtob bounded past Peajoe's whimpering form, laughing as he went.

Abbess Byrony stepped out from her quarters, just in time to fall in to place directly in front of the bully leveret, sending him skidding to a halt.

Ragtob gulped nervously.

He had never really come face-to-face with such an important creature, he was merely visiting the abbey with his dad, Reltob.

Byrony gave the scene a quick look-over, immediately deducing the goings-on.

The Abbess spoke in a shrill whisper. She had never liked leverets. So nosy and mischievous.

"Ragtob, do you mind telling me just what was so important that you had to be loud enough to wake the whole Abbey up, not to mention whatever in Dark Forest you did to Peajoe?"

The misbehaving hare stared up at the draped form. He gulped again.

"Umm..Abbess, I., uh, I was just umâ€¦well you see.."

Peajoe spoke up. "He was just cheatin' in our race to the informiree is what he was doin'! He kicked me in my stommick, too, Miss



Brionee."

The Abbess looked disapprovingly at the little hare.

"If you were older I would think you would know better, Ragtob. But you are merely a Dibbun who needs discipline in the worst way. I'll see to that you receive it, too. Right now there are more important matters to deal with." Without another word she turned and strode off towards the same place the babes had been racing to moments before, the infirmary.

Ragtob spoke from the side of his mouth. "Shoowee! I could almost swear I saw steam risin' from her ears!" The hare smiled after making his comment.

Peajoe glared at the wisecracking leveret.

"Maybe, but I can almost see your father when the Abbess tells him about what you just did! Ha!"

The smile on Ragtob's face quickly faded.

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"Hurry! There's no time! Get them all out, quick!"

Licking flames. Soot and ashes. General chaos.

A village devastated by flames.

This baffled the unconscious Aralia, now in a dreamlike state. The clouded scene faded after what seemed hours to the inanimate form.

"Rise, awake. The time has come." What? Who was this strange creature standing above her? "Hurry, child. He will not wait." He? Aralia's brain was clouded with questions, and her head felt heavy as if she had been struck hard. Aralia could barely lift herself from where she had fallen. She took a glance around.

A forest.

A Dark Forest.

Aralia's mind raced. Before she could emit her distress vocally, the same blurred figure snapped at her, this time with growing impatience.

"There is no more time! Come with me now or your chance is forever lost! The gate will seal soon."

The young fox's vision had cleared somewhat. She could now distinguish the form of two, not only one, but two robed mice leading her, quite urgently, by the paws to some unknown destination. Her paws moved swiftly, mainly from the terror gripping at her mind, threatening to put her in a state of shock. She reassured herself this was merely a dream, it would all be over soon. She sure hoped so.

Colors flashed by as the three raced along.

Leaves fell from mused trees, but liquidated when they made contact with a surface. Strange blue-green lights were all around, growing dim then suddenly blasting out brightly again. Aralia had never been more terrified in her life.

If this was death, she could only hope it would come swiftly.

Dark Forest Gate.

The infamous place of beasts passed on, loomed above the three in a towering colossus.

Enough to scare any living beast to death.

They hung open, as if bidding all to enter. Like a welcoming invitation to meet your demise and pass on.

The group did not stop upon reaching the entrance. They continued pounding on. Aralia wanted to open her mouth and scream as loud as she could, but some strange feeling told her that would surely be a very unwise decision.

Why had the mice become so quiet once they passed through the gates? One had turned to her and placed a finger upon its lips, signaling for silence, as if anticipating her need to cry out. Once the trio reached a clearing, the leaders stopped suddenly. The larger of the pair looked sullenly at Aralia, then spoke, almost sympathetically.

"Shhhh! You must remain silent from here on. One word from you means the end." The mouse's voice was barely an audible whisper. The two released their grip on her paws, which were numb from fear and from being clutched in their vise-like grips.

She rubbed her paws together appreciatively. Hopefully she could now turn and run from this awful place. The mice almost read her mind. "No. There's no turning back now." One extended a paw in the direction of a cluster of large, iridescent trees swaying in an almost imaginary gust of wind.

"You must go now, child. Your destiny and judgement awaits."

Aralia looked around confusedly then took two wary steps forward. Brush crackled underpaw, giving the whole place an eerie surrealism. She stopped abruptly, then took four, five, six more paces forward.

Suddenly, in an electrifying flash, everything disappeared.

The landscape, trees, undergrowth, mice, everything.

Aralia gasped sharply when she found herself standing on apparently, nothing, as if floating in midair. She looked around frantically, fear creeping up the back of her mind.

The scene was now something out of a dream.

Cloud-like puffs whirled around the new landscape in little wisps,

like cream wafting through the air, everything else was pure white. There was a pond about sixty paces from where she was standing, but she dare not move an inch. It was foggy, blurry, like a calm before the storm, as if warning the worst was yet to come. Aralia could see something else not too far away, a mouse perhaps.

It moved. It started walking towards her.

The terrified fox was about to turn tail and run when she heard the most beautiful, soothing voice speak to her. Aralia stood patiently, listening, waiting for it to give her the word that she could leave this place.

Mist shrouded the figure as it spoke.

"Repentance comes at a price, Mielfor." Mielfor? Who was that? "The words you say have no meaning unless they come from your heart, your very soul. Yours is pure evil, therefore no good shall ever emerge from it." The figure floated towards a shimmering pond, and glancing at its nonexistent reflection, spoke to Aralia again. "The flowers bloom in the spring, but die out during the harsh winter. In time, though, they will arise again and flourish in the next spring season. Everything receives a second chance. This holds true even for those unworthy such as yourself. You shall receive your second chance at this, Mielfor, but should you squander it too, you will truly be lost to evil."

Aralia stood, captivated by the sibilant, calming voice. So this was her judgement. She finally understood! What it was talking about was the evil deed she was set to carry out. To murder an Abbeyful of innocent creatures. No, she wouldn't let herself turn out like this Mielfor, who was obviously in a lot of trouble for something he did. She wouldn't waste this chance. She would confess her motives and change her ways to become pure and good like the Abbess. Even if it meant double-crossing Morfa.

The mist rose higher, concealing everything around Aralia. She could not see a thing.

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Aralia woke with a start, cold sweat dripping down her nervous face. She had just received her judgement at Dark Forest Gate. Or had she? Had it all been a dream? Some trick of the unconscious mind? Aralia did not wish to find out. She yelled at the top of her lungs, the sound reverberating throughout the tiny room, the infirmary, in which she was currently held.

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"Hey you pup, isn't it past your bedtime?" Turpig stopped Peajoe by grabbing him by the tail as he waddled, fast as he could, towards the infirmary.

"But Mistah Tupeg, I gotta get to tha infoimoree! The Owailiah is cryin' and needs someone ta look after her!" The little otter struggled out of the mouse sentry's grasp, then continued waddling to the sick room.

Turpig grasped his paw this time, picking him up and holding him in

his arms. "Well, me bucko, the Abbess will take care of that. You ought to be in bed this time of night. I'm sure you're just exhausted after such a hard day of putting up with that little nuisance they call Ragtob." Peajoe yawned. "Well, I am kinda tired. But you're right, Ragtob is a little news ends. He cheated during our race!" Turpig stoked the dozing otter warmly on the head. "Yes, yes, he is, isn't he? Now go to sleep." Peajoe's eyelids fluttered. "Butâ€¦ I â€¦ don't .. wanna .. go to â€¦sleep â€¦. Zzzzz." Before his sentence was finished, Peajoe was fast asleep. Turpig smiled in satisfaction, heading towards the Abbey Nursery to put the little rogue to bed.

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"Hold up. If you value your life you'll cooperate!" Skullclaw and Pidjitt, two replacement officers for the time being, scuttled towards the arrivals to Creggul. Gatekeeper Yarvidoh, a huge sandy colored owl and the resident law-enforcer any time Dasmus was away, had dozed, allowing three kestrels and an odd white hawk to permeate the boundaries unnoticed. This was not intended, for those four birds were officially recognized as Salamandastron's Board of Negotiation, sent to resolve current peace issues as well as freedom for the prisoners who happened to be residents of the Fire Lizard Mountain.

"Excuse us, sirs, but we are the Official Salamandastron Board of Negotiation, or OSBON. We come here in hopes of release for our comrades." Pidjit, a raunchy looking bird of unidentifiable background, drew a dagger, placing it at the neck of the kestrel who had spoken. "Well, excuse us please, misstah! We don't want to start no war or nuthin'! We're a bunch uh pansies! Ha!" Skullclaw the raven snatched the weapon from his fellow replacement officer, scowling deeply. "Do shut up, Pidjitt. You're supposed to represent High Emperor Dasmus and all of Creggul! Do you want the Badger Lord to perceive us in this manner? Please, do act more professional." Pidjit scowled back, but his was far more frightening. Skullclaw clasped his wings together in a professional manner. "Well, on to business I suppose!" The two representatives of Dasmus led the four guests through the threshold, right into the very heart of evil's home. Creggul Castle.

~\*~\*~

Deep under Creggul, far below the scene above, the prison cells were located once one descends a flight of old, crumbling stairs. One of the prisoners from Salamandastron, a young male hare named Callow, who

was sentenced to death by burning that very day, lay flat on his back in his cell. Two of his comrades were in neighboring cells, but communication among any of them resulted in no bread crusts that day. Callow, despite his death sentence, was still hungry.

The somewhat gruesome idea didn't bother him much, he figured something would come up and he could work his way out of this musty joint. Overconfidence was his trademark. He wasn't too bad at songwriting, either. He lay face up on the dusty floor belting out his latest work.

"Ah, dear Rosemary, this one's for you, me lovely

lass:

'Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai

This isn't good, not in the least

Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-aiiii

Old Dasmus plans to have a feast

Aiiiii-ai

With burned hare as the main course-

But we'll leave this place by force

Aiiiii-aii-aii-ai-aiiii

Spare a poor chap's life this day.

Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai

Throw me in this cage-- where I now lay.

Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai

Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-aiiii

But you'll never tame this wild hare

Aii-ai-ai-ai-aiiii

Dasmus won't come close to me, well

Ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai

Not once I escape this cell!'"

"Quiet in there!" A crow named Thistle rapped his spear on the cell gate, rattling the not-so-sturdy structure. "One more peep from you and Dasmus gave us the word to fry you sorry lot right now!" He muttered a curse or two under his breath pertaining to the prisoners, then scratched his head and waddled off scowling. Callow appeared repulsed. Sitting up and stretching his lanky build, he slowly stepped up to the gate of the prison cell. His gaze followed the crow. "Disgusting creature. And I always thought birds were clean beasts! Not like us hares, always tidyin' ourselves up into a right tizz-wozz, eh, Fiala?"

A faint voice replied to Callow. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. After all, otters are quite different from hares, and I happen not to be the latter in the least." Callow stood straight up, his ears flopping forward indignantly. "What's that you say? Hah, you can't fool me. I would recognize a fellow hare even if I were blindfolded in a Midwinter blizzard. Just because I've never seen you doesn't mean you can tell me a whopper of a fib and get away with it!" An audible sigh was emitted. "Callow, I'm an otter. I do not know what it will take to convince you of that, but I am." Callow was nonplussed, but gruff voices and heavy pawsteps growing nearer hinted that he best be quiet for the time being.

End  
file.